As the torchbearer of knowledge during Europe's Dark Ages, the Islamic Empire saved what might otherwise have been lost.

The Torchbearers: Bridging the Dark Ages

A 16mm sound film or videocassette—25 minutes

In the seventh century AD an Arab merchant named Muhammad was impelled by a vision to recite the word of God. To Muhammad the Prophet of Islam was thus revealed the religion of Islam and so the Islamic Empire, a civilization that during Europe's Dark Ages gathered the learning and culture of most of the known world. Had Middle Eastern scholars not rediscovered, synthesized, and advanced the knowledge of antiquity, thus laying the groundwork for the European Renaissance, Western civilization as we now know it might never have been.

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The Torchbearers

- Describes how Middle Eastern scholars during Europe's Dark Ages laid the groundwork for the European Renaissance, and so the progress of the West.
- Traces the rise and spread of Islamic civilization, which began on the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century AD and flourished for some eight hundred years.
- Catalogues the scholarly, technical, and social achievements that were realized during the Golden Age of Islam.
- Discusses the pervasive influence of the Arabic language and culture during the Golden Age of Islam and how they inform the modern age.

Content Summary

To those of us in the West, the Middle East may seem a world with which we have little in common, one with no historical link to the civilization that first emerged in Greece and Rome and evolved through the European Renaissance to modern times. Between the fall of Rome and the start of the Renaissance, however, when Europe lapsed into the Dark Ages and the progress of the West ground to a halt, the Islamic civilization in the Middle East reached its peak, and but for this development the European Renaissance and the rise of the West might never have occurred.

Early in the seventh century, in the town of Mecca on the Arabian Peninsula, an Arab merchant named Muhammad was impelled by a vision to recite the word of God. To Muhammad the Prophet of Islam was thus revealed the religion of Islam, and its holy book, the *Qur'an* (the Arabic word for "recitation" is *Qur'an*, or *Koran*, as it is pronounced in English), a religion that within one hundred years after Muhammad's capture of Mecca in 630 AD spread throughout the Middle East, into Spain, North Africa, and India, and as far east as the frontiers of China.

The Islamic Empire absorbed not only people and land, but learning and culture, and the Muslims (adherents of Islam; literally, in Arabic, "those who surrender [to God]") enriched rather than diluted what they found. In so doing, they synthesized a new world culture whose most obvious symbols survive in Islamic architecture, artifacts, textile design, and literature. (A well-known example of the latter is *The Thousand and One Nights* [or *The Arabian Nights*]—a collection of folktales set in eighth-century Baghdad that features characters from every corner of the Islamic Empire.)

However textured and multilingual this culture became, the Arabic language, as the language of the Koran and the official language of Islamic civilization, remained its unifying thread. Its roots pervade modern English in words such as those that begin with *al*, which in Arabic means "the" (almanac, algebra, arabesque, alchemy, alcohol), and those words, moreover, reflect the areas in which the Muslims excelled: medicine, architecture, astronomy, mathematics, and chemistry. (One notable achievement was the development of Arabic numerals—a synthesis of a positional numbering system imported from India that included the Muslim invention of the "zero.")

As custodians of the learning of the ancient world the Muslims rediscovered, interpreted, and elaborated upon much that might have been lost, thus laying the groundwork for the European Renaissance, which began with the rediscovery by European scholars of ancient Greek philosophical and scientific works. (Although later translated into Latin, the works were unearthed not in their original Greek, but in Arabic translations.) The wisdom of the Chinese, the Indians, the Persians, the Jews—this too the Muslims absorbed and synthesized in their quest for a universal education that culminated in the establishment of the world's first university (the mosque of al-Azhar in Cairo, founded in 970 AD and still active today).

As the torchbearers of culture and civilization for more than five hundred years it is no wonder that modern Middle Easterners look upon the achievements of the West with a mixture of awe and condescension. They may be envious, but without them the West might never have left the Dark Ages.

The Middle East Series

The Middlemen: The Pivotal Role of the Middle East (color no. 4001)

At the center of the known world for centuries, the Middle East was a geographical, commercial, ethnic, and religious crossroads. And Middle Easterners were the world's "middlemen"—an ethnocultural blend the elements of which illuminate both the Middle Eastern sensibility and the region's current instability.

The Torchbearers: Bridging the Dark Ages (color no. 4002)

Coincident with the Dark Ages in Europe, Islamic civilization in the Middle East reached its peak. Had Middle Eastern scholars not rediscovered, synthesized, and advanced the knowledge of antiquity, thus laying the groundwork for further exploration and discovery, the European Renaissance and Western civilization as we now know it might never have been.

Holy Land: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Middle East (color no. 4003)

As the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—three of the world's great monotheistic religions—the Middle East has come to be known as the "Holy Land," yet despite the reverence and awe this region's history inspires, disputes based on long-standing religious claims to the land continue to rend its contemporary fabric.

Family Matters: The Role of the Family in the Middle East (color no. 4004)

Traditionally the model upon which social and political life has been based, the large, extended, and patriarchal Middle Eastern family has begun to fragment under Western influence. Although rapid westernization has benefited many, fundamentalists have tried to save the old society by reviving traditional ways, thus heightening regional tensions.

New Frontiers: The Middle East following World War I (color no. 4005)

The nation-states of the Middle East that today wage war for territory and power did not exist before World War I. By creating artificial frontiers and introducing the alien concept of nationalism, a concept that superseded the traditional Middle Eastern identity based on family and religion, certain Western powers may unknowingly have set the stage for today's conflicts.

Captains and Kings: Authority in the Middle East (color no. 4006)

Compelled by ancient precedents and the tenets of Islam to accept authoritarian rule, Middle Eastern nations (except for Turkey, Lebanon, and Israel, each of which is marred by factionalism and religious strife) have resisted the imposition of Western-style governments and still sanction the military regime or the monarchy.

Sects and Violence: Fragmentation within Religions (color no. 4007)

Although sectarian differences between Jews, Christians, and Muslims are a main ingredient of Middle East tensions, the struggle for power and territory is also rife among divergent sects within each faith who are trying to legitimize their religious beliefs and principles.

Ancient and Modern: The Fall and Rise of the Middle East (color no. 4008)

In this century Middle Eastern independence and oil wealth have reversed the region's downward trend that began, ironically, in the midst of Europe's rebirth. State-of-the-art technology has not, however, replaced tradition; the two coexist in an uneasy alliance.

The Story of Oil: Chief Economic Resource of the Middle East (color no. 4009)

Beneath the sand and rock of the Middle East lie two-thirds of the world's known oil reserves. An object of exploitation since ancient times and a cause of current tension within and without the Middle East, oil has nonetheless brought great wealth—though unequally distributed—to a poor region.

Independence: Egypt & Algeria (color no. 4010)

Between the first and second world wars the Middle East moved from a religious and familial consciousness into one that was national and secular. Triggered in part by the decline of European colonial power, this shift effected the independence of Egypt and Algeria after World War II.

Homeland: Israel & Palestine (color no. 4011)

Promised to both the Arabs and the Jews by the British and partitioned by the United Nations into two states, Palestine, which became the independent State of Israel in 1948, is still the object of a protracted struggle between Israelis and Palestinian nationalists, both of whom maintain ancient claims to the territory.

Revolution: Iraq & Iran (color no. 4012)

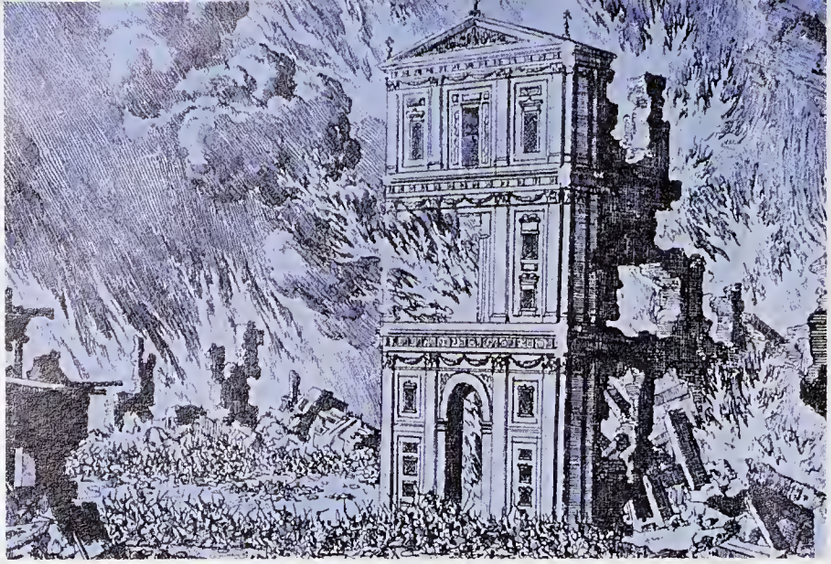
Since World War II internal political revolutions in such countries as Iraq and Iran have been a salient feature of Middle East politics. Caused in part by postwar economic instability and the withdrawal of colonial powers, the initial unrest was largely a response to Western exploitation.

Change: Turkey & Saudi Arabia (color no. 4013)

Opposites on an ideological spectrum, Turkey and Saudi Arabia best illustrate how nonviolent change has affected the Middle East since World War I. Saudi Arabia entered the modern age with its Arab, Islamic soul intact; Turkey cast aside its heritage to modernize only to draw opposition from traditionalists over the heavy cost of progress.

Identity: Lebanon (color no. 4014)

The religious and civil dissension that has beset Lebanon since the withdrawal of the French in 1946 began with a national identity crisis. Because the Lebanese embody all the elements that now determine the Middle Eastern identity, their recent history may be read as a history in microcosm of twentieth-century Middle East instability.



For Discussion

1. Where and how did Islamic civilization begin? How did Middle Eastern scholars make the European Renaissance possible?
2. What are the most obvious symbols of the new world culture that was synthesized by the Muslims?
3. What elements of the Arabic language has modern English absorbed?
4. Discuss those Middle Eastern inventions, discoveries, and establishments that have survived in the West to the present. Which of these still exist or function in their original form? Choose one achievement of the Golden Age of Islam (such as the invention of Arabic numerals or the institution of the first university) and trace its development from its implementation or discovery to the present.
5. According to the film many modern Middle Easterners "regard [the progress of the West] with a mixture of awe and condescension." To what would you attribute this attitude?
6. How is an ethnocentric perspective on history dangerous to us as individuals and as a nation? Thus far, would your education lead you to credit Islamic civilization as a source of or contributor to Western civilization?

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